DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 428 991 SO 029 623

AUTHOR Patrick, John J.
TITLE Education for Constructive Engagement of Citizens in Democratic Civil Society and Constitutional Government.
PUB DATE 1998-10-08
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Engagement in Political and Civic Life: "Citizenship in Twenty-First Century Democracies" (Valley Forge, PA, October 4-9, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Citizen Participation; *Citizenship Education; *Civics; *Curriculum Development; Democracy; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education
IDENTIFIERS *Political Education

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses current concerns about how to improve political and civic engagement through education in U.S. schools and society. Part 1 examines ideas pertaining to "A Persistent Problem of Democracy: Education for Constructive Engagement of Citizens in Common Purposes and Commitments of Civil Society and Constitutional Government." Part 2 proposes the "Development of Intellectual Capital for the Engaged Citizen: Curricular Foundations for Constructive Engagement in Political and Civic Life." Part 3 explains the "Development of Social Capital for the Engaged Citizen: Educational Experiences for Constructive Engagement in Political and Civic Life." Part 4 offers a "Conclusion and Postscript about Constructive Engagement of Citizens in Political and Civic Life." (Contains a 51-item bibliography.) (BT)

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EDUCATION FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF CITIZENS IN DEMOCRATIC CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT

ED 428 991

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October 8, 1998

SO 029 623

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Presented to the International Conference on "Engagement in Political and Civic Life: Citizenship in Twenty-First Century Democracies" at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, October 4-9, 1998. This conference was conducted by the Center for Civic Education at Calabasas, California, U.S.A. and the Federal Center for Political Education of the Federal Republic of Germany.

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EDUCATION FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF CITIZENS IN DEMOCRATIC CIVIL SOCIETY AND CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT

By John J. Patrick

Introduction

The 1990s have been years of celebration about the global prospects of democracy. More than 100 countries in various parts of the world meet the minimal standard for democracy, which requires that key officials of the government should be selected through free, fair, contested, and periodic elections in which virtually everyone in the adult population has the right to vote. Before the 1970s, less than 40 countries met this minimal standard (Diamond 1996, 20). According to the widely respected Freedom House Survey Team (1998, 1-8), 61 percent of the world's countries, including 55 percent of its population, have democratically elected leaders. Further, 81 of the world's "electoral democracies" are judged by Freedom House to be "free" in their guarantees of personal and political rights, and 36 are partly free.

This decade of democracy's apparent worldwide triumph has also included ominous signs of its "discontents" and ill health in America and abroad. The "third wave" of democracy's global expansion, which began in the 1970s, seems to have peaked and declined; once discredited communist parties have been resurgent, if not dominant, in post-communist countries; ethnic/racial-group conflict and cultural-group separatism have been ascendant in the United States of America and elsewhere; and the engagement of citizens in the United States in their civil society and government has declined greatly (Diamond 1996; Putnam 1995; Sandel 1996). A recent report of The National Commission on Civic Renewal (1998, 6) has sounded alarms about the declining quantity and quality of citizen engagement in America and warns, "In

a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators."

This paper addresses current concerns about how to improve political and civic engagement through education in schools and society in the United States of America.

Part 1 examines ideas pertaining to "A Persistent Problem of Democracy: Education for Constructive Engagement of Citizens in Common Purposes and Commitments of Civil Society and Constitutional Government."

Part 2 treats "Development of Intellectual Capital for the Engaged Citizen: Curricular Foundations for Constructive Engagement in Political and Civic Life. [1]

Part 3 treats "Development of Social Capital for the Engaged Citizen: Educational Experiences for Constructive Engagement in Political and Civic Life."

Part 4 offers a "Conclusion and Postscript about Constructive Engagement of Citizens in Political and Civic Life."

1. A Persistent Problem of Democracy: Education for Constructive Engagement of Citizens in Common Purposes and Commitments of Civil Society and Constitutional Government

Engagement of citizens with the institutions and operations of their communities and governments is a central characteristic of a healthy democracy. Several recent reports and studies, however, concur that the "overall civic condition [of the United States of America] is weaker than it was—and in need of significant improvement" (National Commission on Civic Renewal 1998, 23). There has been a steady decrease in the engagement of citizens in their civil society and government, which is both an indicator and consequence of declining health in political and civic life (American Civic Forum 1994; Eisenhower Leadership Group 1996; Lipset

1995; Putnam 1995).

The current wave of concern about citizen engagement in political and civic life is neither unprecedented nor unfounded. It is an emphatic expression of a persistent problem of democracy in the United States and elsewhere: how to engage citizens more fully, effectively, and constructively in civil society and government and thereby to confirm the validity and legitimacy of popular government in a free and open society.

But engagement of citizens in political and civic life, if necessary to the vitality of a democracy, is not sufficient to its long-term prospects for good health. We need to ask and answer questions about the quality and commitments of this engagement, not merely about its quantity, to determine whether or not it is constructive or conducive to the long-term well being of democracy. Not all political and civic activity is compatible with our ideals or goals of citizenship and government in a democracy. So we need to ask: what should be its purposes—the criteria by which we judge the quality of engagement in political and civic life? What lessons should be taught and learned in schools and other venues of education about the ends and purposes for which we want citizens to be engaged in their civil society and constitutional government?

Of course, responses to questions about the quality and ends of constructive citizen engagement are influenced by one's political and civic traditions and institutions. So I readily turn to the founding era of the United States, to America's founding documents and personalities, to find the sources of common purposes and commitments that should guide the education of citizens for engagement with their civil society and government.

The major goal of Thomas Jefferson's proposals for the education of citizens was derived

directly from the principal American founding document, The Declaration of Independence, which asserted, "That to secure these Rights [to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness] Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the Consent of the Governed" (Center for Civic Education 1997, 6). In line with these criteria for good government, Jefferson recommended education of citizens "to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom" (Pangle and Pangle 1993, 108). Thus, according to Jefferson and his compatriots, constructively engaged citizens are ones who have the desire and capacity to protect their natural rights as responsible participants in civil society and government. Through this kind of constructive engagement in behalf of their natural rights, citizens reaffirm the principle and practice of government by consent of the governed.

James Madison, Jefferson's best friend and political partner, pointed to another widely shared founding-era purpose of political and civic engagement in *Federalist* 51, "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions" (Center for Civic Education 1997, 43). According to Madison and like-minded American founders, a constructive purpose of engagement in political and civic life is participation to check and otherwise harness the necessary powers of government so that they will be employed to protect the rights of individuals and not to abuse them. Thus, a major purpose of education for constructive engagement in political and civic life is to teach citizens the timeless truth that their rights are at risk if their government is either too weak or too strong. Further, it should teach them that

security for their rights depends upon their interest and capacity to judge the quality and uses of their government's power and to act effectively to either enhance or limit it, under various circumstances, in order to guard against abuses of their rights.

The founders were, of course, concerned about both individual rights and the common good, about both liberalism and republicanism. They understood that security for individual rights could be achieved only in a healthy community. So an objective of responsible engagement in their political and civic life was to promote the public good, the general welfare of society, in concert with the rights of individuals. Thus, education for citizen engagement involves teaching and learning of civic virtues, traits of character that dispose one to subordinate personal interests for the common good, and development of capacity to make sound judgments about when and how to act for the general welfare of society (Callan 1997; Dagger 1997).

Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas Pangle (1993, 11) emphasize the intertwined purposes of education for constructive civic engagement in the founding era, which involved education and action to secure both individual rights and the common good. "The paramount educational challenge of the Founding generation was that of preparing future generations to become democratic citizens who would sustain a regime of individual freedoms as well as responsible self-rule." This "paramount educational challenge" has persisted from the founding era to our era. And, according to high-profile reports and studies issued during the 1990s by leading think tanks and scholars, the challenge is especially acute today. How can we meet our educational challenge of civic renewal? What should be done through education in schools to renew responsible and constructive engagement in political and civic life and thereby revitalize civil society and constitutional government in the United States of America?

2. Development of Intellectual Capital for the Engaged Citizen: Curricular Foundations for Constructive Engagement in Political and Civic Life

First of all, schools should enable students to acquire and use intellectual capital for civic and political purposes. Intellectual capital consists of knowledge and skills that enable one to make sense of the world and thereby to act rationally and effectively within it. The kind of intellectual capital that citizens need is knowledge of democratic principles and practices and cognitive capacity to apply this knowledge to public affairs (Hirsch, Jr. 1996, 17-47; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). Among the key ideas are government, popular sovereignty, political participation, constitutionalism, human rights, responsible citizenship, civil society, and market economy. This is an essential, if not exhaustive, inventory of concepts in the intellectual capital of a well-educated democratic citizen. The kind of "verbal cognitive proficiency" that enables one to use key concepts to interpret information and act effectively in political and civic life "is the most relevant cognitive ability in relation to democratic citizenship" (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996, 41).

Citizens in possession of ample intellectual capital have the capacity to pursue time-honored purposes or ends of constitutional government in America, such as security for individual rights and promotion of the common good, to be self-governing citizens capable of "enlightened political engagement" (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996, 11-38). Further, intellectual capital is related positively to one's propensity to participate in political and civic life, and it enables warranted decisions about when and how to be engaged civically and politically. Finally, intellectual capital is correlated with other attributes of good citizenship, such as political tolerance, political interest, and sense of political efficacy. "In short, informed

citizens are better citizens in a number of ways consistent with normative and pragmatic notions of what constitutes good citizenship" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 19).

Those with less intellectual capital needed for constructive engagement in political and civic life have less opportunity to seek and gain the benefits of democratic citizenship. For them, democracy in America does not work as intended because they lack the capacity to participate effectively within it. This is grossly unjust say political scientists Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, who contend that, "For citizens who are the most informed, democracy works much as intended, while for those who are the most uninformed, democracy is a tragedy or a farce" (1996, 60).

One educator, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., speaks for many when he claims that a fair opportunity to acquire and use intellectual capital is a "civil right" that should be readily available to all (1996, 43-48). And most political scientists agree with Delli Carpini and Keeter, "that democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed" (1996, 1).

Given the critical significance of intellectual capital needed for constructive engagement in political and civic life, it is regrettable that so many citizens in the United States do not possess adequate amounts of it. Numerous studies of the political/civic knowledge of American youth and adults, during the past half-century, reveal gross ignorance of principles and practices of democracy and information about political institutions, leaders, and events (Niemi and Junn 1998, 24-51). It seems that a minority of citizens possess the intellectual capital needed for "enlightened engagement"in political and civic life. According to Niemi and Junn (1998, 5), "the lack of knowledge among American citizens is striking to those of us who deal with political life daily. What is most significant, however, is not so much the inability to recall

isolated facts and figures but the breadth and depth of the ignorance"—that is, the incapacity to demonstrate possession of intellectual capital needed for "enlightened engagement."

Can civic education in schools be an effective means to a more broad and equitable distribution of intellectual capital needed for constructive engagement in political and civic life? Yes, say many prominent educators and political scientists (Ceaser and McGuinn, 1998; Hirsch, Jr., 1996; Niemi and Junn 1998).

Niemi and Junn document conclusively the potential of civic education in schools to develop intellectual capital among students, which is needed for constructive or enlightened engagement. Effective civic education involves systematic teaching and learning of key ideas, principles and practices of democracy, throughout the elementary and secondary school curriculum. As students mature, they should encounter and use the same interconnected core concepts in cycles of increasing depth and complexity and in relationship to an ever-broader scope of information. Further, effective civic education includes application of core concepts to analysis and appraisal of public issues and problems of democracy. And it involves ample opportunities for learners to discuss ideas and otherwise interact with one another, as they confront issues and problems of democratic government and citizenship. So systematic exposure to key ideas and systematic practice in applying them to the organization and interpretation of information and issues is "what makes students learn" the requisites of constructive and enlightened civic engagement (Niemi and Junn 1998, 117-146).

Development of intellectual capital through the school curriculum involves the conjoining of core content and processes—basic subject matter and cognitive processes that all students should be expected to learn. To elevate one over the other—core content over processes

or vice versa—is a pedagogical flaw that impedes achievement of learning (Hirsch, Jr. 1996; Shanker 1995). Further, some ideas, information, and issues should be viewed by teachers and learners as more important and thereby more worthy of emphasis in the school curriculum than other subject matter. Students should be taught that all knowledge is not equal in its value for constructive engagement in political and civic life. For example, common knowledge of core principles and practices of democracy is a prerequisite to the development and maintenance of an active community of self-governing citizens. Without this kind of common knowledge, which should be developed through common learning experiences in school, citizens are unable to act together to analyze public policy issues or problems, make cogent decisions about them, or participate intelligently to resolve them. *The National Standards for Civics and Government* (Center for Civic Education 1994) is an excellent guidebook to common knowledge for the school curriculum designed to develop intellectual capital for constructive engagement in political and civic life.

Development of intellectual capital—essential knowledge and cognitive skills—is enhanced by a curriculum anchored in core subjects or academic disciplines. Well designed and delivered courses in civics, government, and history—based on ideas, information, and issues of democracy in America and abroad—enable students to acquire a fund of knowledge that they can use to comprehend the challenges of political and civic life and to cope with them. According to John T. Bruer, a leading cognitive scientist, "Expertise [development of intellectual capital] depends on highly organized, domain-specific knowledge that can arise only after extensive experience and practice in the domain [the academic discipline]. Strategies can help us process knowledge, but first we have to have the knowledge to process" (1993, 15). And a review of

research by James P. Shaver offers this conclusion: "Students will better learn and use critical thinking skills if these skills and strategies are taught explicitly in the context of content knowledge and with attention to their appropriate applications" (1995, 150).

Proponents of developing intellectual capital through well-connected, "domain-specific" learning experiences reject recommendations by some prominent social studies educators for an "issues-centered" or "problems-centered" curriculum based on interdisciplinary organization of content and a generalized model of reflective thinking or problem solving, which elevates process over content. According to the advocates of an "issues-centered" curriculum, the main purpose of the school is **not** to teach a common core of knowledge but "to provide the means for the learner to develop the intellectual skills related to critical thinking and problem solving" (Jarolimek and Foster 1993, 142). Others stress that knowledge is ephemeral and only cognitive processes are everlastingly valuable components of education for democratic citizenship. Thus, they oppose the very idea of a core curriculum anchored in subjects that should be commonly learned by students (Evans 1997; Shor 1992; Engle and Ochoa 1988).

Current calls for an interdisciplinary, problems-based education for democratic citizenship, anchored in a general cognitive process model that dismisses the fundamental importance or preeminent worth of particular content, are neither novel nor practical. They have persisted from the 1920s through the 1990s despite meager evidence of their worth in bringing about student achievement. Practical problems that have prevented successful implementation of this kind of civic education have been thoroughly documented in historical studies of failed curricular reforms (Bellack 1978; Cremin 1964; Hertzberg 1981) and in contemporary classroom research (Roth 1994; Gardner and Boix-Mansilla 1994).

Issues-centered or problems-based lessons or modules may be a valuable part of civic education in tandem with "domain-specific" instruction. For example, *Project Citizen*, developed by the Center for Civic Education, is a worthy set of methods and materials on how to incorporate teaching and learning about community problems into a solid, subject-based school curriculum (Tolo, 1998). It seems, however, that a social studies or civics curriculum based primarily or exclusively on current public issues or problems, and which ignores systematic common learning of core ideas anchored in academic disciplines, **does not work**.

Let us heed the wise advice of Albert Shanker, the late president of the American Federation of Teachers, who said that "throwing away disciplinary learning for youngsters who have not yet mastered the disciplines creates serious problems of teaching and learning" in schools (1995, 5). And let us remember that development of the student's intellectual capital is an indispensable component of education for democratic citizenship. So, too, is social capital an essential element of civic education.

3. Development of Social Capital for the Engaged Citizen: Educational Experiences for Constructive Engagement in Political and Civic Life

What is social capital? Why should it be a core component of education for constructive engagement in political and civic life? And how can it be developed among students and citizens in the school and society?

Social capital consists of participatory skills and civic virtues or dispositions. Civic virtues refer to such traits of character as civility, honesty, self-restraint, tolerance, compassion, patriotism, respect for the worth and dignity of each person, concern for the common good, and

social trust. Participatory skills refer to three types of tasks: interacting, monitoring, and influencing. Interacting pertains to skills of communication and cooperation in political and civic life. Monitoring involves skills needed to track the work of political leaders and institutions of government. And influencing refers to skills used to affect outcomes in political and civic life, such as the resolution of public issues (Center for Civic Education 1994; NAEP Civics Consensus Project 1996).

Political scientist Robert Putnam explains how participatory skills and civic virtues can become social capital. "By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital—tools and training that enhance individual productivity—social capital refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (1995, 67).

An essential element of social capital is trust among the citizens of a community. People who trust one another can cooperate to achieve common objectives. Conversely, alienated, atomized, or cynical people are likely to stay outside civil society in a marginalized domain of inefficacy (Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 1993; Seligman 1997).

Robert Putnam's long-term research indicates that participation by citizens in a network of community-based voluntary organizations, the fabric of a democratic civil society, is the means to build social capital—civic virtues and participatory skills—in combination with intellectual capital, which "makes democracy work" (Putnam 1993, 181-185). Through voluntary participation in civil society organizations, citizens practice skills and habits of behavior that enable them to be constructively engaged in political and civic life. So community-based, voluntary organizations are public laboratories, in which citizens learn

democracy by doing it, contributing mightily to the well being of their civil society and constitutional government.

Development of social capital can be achieved through the school curriculum in concert with learning experiences outside the classroom. For example, civic virtues and participatory skills can be acquired through cooperative learning and service learning experiences that connect academic lessons in the classroom with educational activities in the community outside the school. Cooperative learning experiences involve students working together in small groups to achieve common goals. And service learning involves students participating together in projects that serve the public good in the school or the community outside the school (Schine and Halsted 1997, 195-210).

Development of social capital for the engaged citizen is likely to be enhanced when cooperative and service learning experiences are connected systematically to the development of intellectual capital through lessons about academic subject matter. For example, principles and practices of democracy that students learn through formal academic activities in the classroom should deliberately be applied to service learning experiences in the community outside the school. And students should be required to reflect upon the connections of core academic concepts and service learning experiences (Youniss and Yates 1997, 135-151). Evidence from research on school-based service learning is tentative but positive in suggesting "that community participation is a powerful learning experience that, if structured properly, can be enjoyable and worthwhile" (Shaver 1995, 157). Positive effects are greatest when educators provide for systematic briefing and debriefing of learning experiences, which connect the formal program of studies in school and civic action in the community.

A new program that exemplifies positive findings of research about school-based service learning is *We the People... Project Citizen*, developed by the Center for Civic Education for use by middle school students. Participants in this project cooperate in small groups to identify a significant public issue or problem, conduct research to become informed about it, examine alternative responses put forward to resolve the issue or problem, select an alternative response to the issue as desirable and defend it against interrogators or opponents, and take action with like-minded participants to influence a practical resolution of the issue or problem. Thus, participants in *Project Citizen* become constructively engaged citizens and thereby practice the intellectual and participatory skills and civic virtues that make democracy work to protect individual rights and serve the common good (Tolo 1998).

Student participation in extracurricular activities of the school is also related positively to development of social capital needed by citizens for constructive engagement in political and civic life. Participation in democratically run student organizations, and especially in student government activities, provides opportunities to practice the habits and skills of democracy. Further, the ethos or civic climate of the school may be a powerful factor in promoting or inhibiting development of social capital needed for political and civic life. There seems to be a positive relationship between a democratic school spirit or ethos and development among students of civic skills and virtues (Mosher, Kenny, Jr., and Garrod 1994).

Development of social capital among students is connected closely to overarching purposes and standards of good civic education and good government in America—security for individual rights and promotion of the common good through government by consent of the governed. The First Amendment constitutional rights of free speech, press, assembly, and

association, for example, mean little unless citizens have the capabilities and dispositions to responsibly use them to vitalize their civil society and influence their constitutional government. Through vibrant civil society organizations, citizens may effectively express interests to government officials and hold them accountable to constituents. Further, they may, when necessary, protect their rights to liberty by using the collective power of individuals in civil society organizations as a countervailing force against encroachments by overbearing government officials. Thus, social capital in concert with intellectual capital enables citizens to take responsibility for maintaining government by consent of the governed and security for individual rights.

4. Conclusion and Postscript about Constructive Engagement of Citizens in Political and Civic Life

Do sufficient numbers of Americans have the intellectual and social capital needed to sustain and improve upon their constitutional and representative democracy? If not, as many scholars and public figures fear, how do we use our schools and other venues of education to more adequately prepare the people to assume their responsibilities of citizenship? From the founding of the United States until today, Americans have worried about these questions and argued about the answers.

In this paper, I have offered responses to these questions. I have discussed recommendations about how to develop through education in schools the intellectual and social capital needed by individuals for constructive engagement in political and civic life. And I recognize that the evidence and arguments in support of my pedagogical proposals, though

significant and reasonable, may not compel agreement. Rather, they may provoke arguments.

Some scholars, educators, and prominent public leaders dispute the alarms raised by The National Commission on Civic Renewal, Robert Putnam, and others, whose views are discussed in this paper. Consider, for example, the different and more positive view of our civic condition presented persuasively in an interesting new book, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. The author, Michael Schudson, boldly asserts, "Citizenship in the United States has not disappeared. It has not even declined. It has, inevitably, changed." And says Schudson, the changes mostly are for the good (1998, 294).

Schudson claims that contemporary critics of America's civic condition unrealistically are trying to apply the model of enlightened, active, participatory citizenship, once espoused by early twentieth-century Progressives and revived currently by late twentieth-century advocates of "strong democracy" (Barber 1984). But, says Schudson, this model does not fit contemporary America, and therefore it is a misleading and unfair standard by which to judge the condition of its civic life.

Schudson offers a model of "rights-conscious citizenship" by which America's civic condition at the end of the twentieth century appears to be quite satisfactory. Schudson's model of the constructively engaged citizen emphasizes selective civic and political action by individuals and groups for the targeted purpose of protecting individual or minority group rights perceived to be at risk from a particular public proposal or policy. The federal judiciary is as likely to be the target of civic and political action as traditional "political branches of government"—the legislature and the executive—in recognition of the Court's capacity to trump majoritarian decisions to protect minority rights. According to Schudson, security for rights—a

time-honored purpose of government and political/civic action in America—has never been enjoyed as extensively and expansively in the United States as it is today.

By the standards of Schudson's "rights-conscious citizenship" model, the sufficiently engaged citizen is one who, either individually or collectively, is an effective monitor of government policies and actions with regard to security for rights. This "rights-monitoring" citizen, however, typically is not continually involved in a hyperactive political and civic life. Schudson concludes positively "that the rise of the rights-regarding citizen has done more to enhance democracy than to endanger it" (1998, 293).

Do you tend to agree with Michael Schudson or his opponents, the advocates of civic renewal through revival of a highly participatory model of constructive engagement in civic and political life? Or do you take a different position about the civic condition of America and how to respond to it through education in schools and society?

Regardless of variations in our responses to this debate, we can agree that civic consciousness in America, and with it civic education, is once again in vogue across a broad spectrum of political and intellectual life—from the left to the right sides of our ongoing public debates. It seems that the "anti-civic orthodoxy" born in the protests and alienation of the 1960s has run its course and is declining into disfavor (Ceaser and McGuinn 1998, 85-90). So the time is ripe, the fruitful moment is at hand, to consider carefully alternative ideas about the quality of civic life in America and how to preserve and improve it through education in schools, both public and private, and in the society at large.

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